September, 2011

Getting to Know Some of Baton Rouge's Young Prosecutors

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/beau_brock/41/
The mission of the East Baton Rouge District Attorney’s (DA’s) office is to seek justice for both rich and poor, high and low. According to Louisiana law, it has the sole authority to decide who, what and how to prosecute those accused of criminal misdeeds. With such great power comes even greater responsibility as the office holds not only the power to affect every citizen’s liberty, but literally makes decisions over life and death in special cases with aggravating circumstances. Such cases involving violent consequences perpetrated on the innocent demand EBR Parish prosecutors be honed into highly disciplined, responsible enforcers of proportional justice. Through a series of interviews, I met with young prosecutors to find out how they are meeting this challenge for Baton Rouge as it now is being transformed exponentially from the “big town” we have lived in these past two decades to the largest city in our state.

DAVID deBLIEUX has been a prosecutor with the DA’s office since August 2006, and he loves his job. “Sex, crime prosecutions involve all too often the tragic irony of trying to protect your kids from threats when they leave home, only to be blind to the danger within,” deBlieux said. He loves the adversarial process inherent in criminal law, and he tries to anticipate how a defense attorney could defeat a case prior to determining a formal charge. When taking a plea agreement, he tries to envision the victim in the case as his neighbor, and poses the following question to himself: “Could I defend what my actions were in this case to my neighbor?” For deBlieux, this is a 24-7 job. “You don’t turn it off; I think I’ve constructed half my opening statements in the shower!”

CHRIIS HESTER has been with the office since November 2009. He was always interested since coming out of law school. His father Judge Bob Hester, prior to being elected judge, served successfully for several years as one of our parish’s finest prosecutors, and was his beau ideal. “He definitely inspired me to do something similar,” Hester said. “As a prosecutor, you get a truer appreciation for the amount of crime in Baton Rouge, and also see what kind of a difference we all in the justice system can make when committed to serving justice. It’s great to get into the courtroom every day and work in such a high volume business that is always dynamic in nature. Never does the music stop.”

MELISSA MORVANT, who has been with the DA’s office for more than five years, said that she always wanted to work there largely based on her father’s long-time service as DA of Lafourche Parish. Morvant is fervent in her belief being a prosecutor is more of a calling than a profession. She likes working with people and assisting them in attaining closure through the process. She contrasted it to her prior legal experience in doing toxic-tort defense, which did not captivate her enthusiasm nearly as much as criminal law does.

Her father, District Attorney Cam Morvant, inspired her to pursue her interest in becoming a prosecutor. “I saw the fulfillment he received in working with people and helping them obtain justice, and wanted to do this work myself,” Morvant said. “The choices made by perpetrators of crime, especially murder, have far-reaching impacts upon families and even generations across the board.”

Being a female prosecutor does present additional challenges, she said, joking that, “BRAVO should do a reality show on the women of the office!” She explained that “the office is much more able to assist in dealing with victims’ families through the entirety of the criminal process with the numerous services it now provides.”

JERMAINE GUILLORY, who came to the office in February 2010, agrees with Morvant’s claim that working there is more than just a job. “Every day you make decisions that affect people’s lives; this is an awesome burden, awesome privilege,” he said. “I can understand the plight of the people I see, but not necessarily the crime itself.”

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Guillory senses his own cultural burden, at times, when discharging his duty and is not an absolutist when it comes to justice itself. “Law is not black and white,” he reminds himself as he attempts to determine the reason behind perpetrators’ actions in his review of cases. Common questions for Guillory when making charging decisions include: “Does this person have a criminal history? Should this person be charged with a felony for this conduct? Is there a pattern to this conduct or is it an aberration?”

Guillory admitted that his role as prosecutor has impacted his thinking on wider societal concerns. He said that we all share responsibility in better educating our youth about the differences between fundamentally right and wrong conduct.

JOHN RUSSELL joined the office on Aug. 15, 2008. Previously, he worked for six years in private criminal defense practice and, before that, in the Public Defender’s Office for another eight years. He welcomed the opportunity to work with District Attorney Hillar Moore, as he had started his career as a law clerk at Marabella & Moore, a criminal defense firm that Hillar Moore shared with now sitting District Court Judge Anthony Marabella.

“I wouldn’t have believed it myself before I came here, but most of the criminal defense bar has no idea how much work the average ADA has to put in in order to bring a single case to trial. It is far more challenging than I thought it would be,” Russell said.

At one time, Russell believed that the state’s cases were sort of “ready-made” and comparatively easy to win. Nothing, apparently, could be further from the truth. Like his more experienced colleagues, Russell has found that, in some cases at least, getting witnesses and even victims to cooperate with the prosecution can be a real problem. Whether due to fear, intimidation, mistrust of the system, apathy or, even worse, “pay-offs,” a witness’ or victim’s refusal to come to court can be “extremely frustrating, particularly in violent crimes.” He has also found the day-to-day decision making in his new job vastly different from his old work as defense counsel. “With defense, all of your decisions are geared towards one person: your client. As a prosecutor, you must balance a much wider range of factors in an effort to serve justice.”

This point is highlighted by another misconception that Russell had as a defense attorney – that the lines for prosecutors are clear-cut and in black and white. “The reality is that the lines can be quite blurred,” he said. “Cases involving self-defense or drug addiction, for example, can be quite challenging. You have to work very hard to do the right thing. There is no template.”

His experience on both sides of the bar has provided him with a different perspective from some of the other prosecutors. Russell doesn’t view “criminal justice as a ‘black-hat vs. white-hat’ proposition. Each side plays an absolutely essential role, and it’s the interplay between the two sides that results in a truly fair and balanced system.” Indeed, for Russell, switching counsel tables has reaffirmed this belief rather than undermined it.

LESLEY RICARD joined the office in August 2009. She sees it as an “opportunity to help protect our community.” She had always wanted to be a prosecutor and has seen first-hand “the correlation
between our high drop-out and our high crime rate.” Leslie comes from Dennis Mills, which is not far from Greensburg. She commuted to Amite to attend high school.

“In Dennis Mills, there is not a lot of exposure for young people to the value of education,” Ricard said. Her commitment to her roots has never wavered, as both she and her brother serve as continuing mentors for young people there. Leslie regularly reaches out to girls of the area to expose them to career opportunities an education might provide by bringing them to the courthouse, doctor’s offices and the capitol. She wants to show them “it’s cool to have a degree” and shares her joy with them and creates hope.

Ricard’s most profound moment came when she was sitting co-counsel on a second-degree murder trial for an event that occurred 25 years ago. Between the time of this murder and the trial, the defendant had actually committed another murder. After the successful guilty verdict, “the victim’s mom was so grateful. She could now sleep at night and didn’t have to wonder anymore, and felt her daughter would now rest in peace,” she said.